

TV Documentaries

It's not many years since TV documentaries were the best programmes of the week. You could turn to them with confidence for a bit of respite from the blaring trash that makes up the rest of the schedules. Documentaries used not to dumb down. They were rather like the civilised local libraries, before these too became infested with gadgets, noise and barbarous oiks with their i-pods. But now TV documentaries are unwatchable. Having observed the process of their manufacture at close range, I thought I would offer an outline of how the typical documentary comes to be made.

Jon is a writer. He phones his friend who is a producer at, as it might be, the BBC or Channel Four. Or, more likely, he is "Executive Production Values Controller for *Stararse*—an independent film company making programmes for *The History Channel*."

Jon says, "Hello, Tarquin, I've got this great idea for making a documentary about an order of Trappist monks."

Tarquin takes another gulp of his *Latte*: "Hi Jon—that's really cool. I love it! Just refresh my memory—what *are* Trappist monks?"

"They're an enclosed order of religious who keep a perpetual vow of silence."

"Of religious *what*?"

"Monks—just monks."

"Cool! Cool! Let's go for it. As it happens, we've got some budget at *Stararse* in our Diversity and Multicultural Programmes Unit."

"I'm afraid it's not exactly multicultural, Tarquin. The monks are all Christians."

"No worries! No probs, mate! Hey—we don't have to mention that."

"But how——?"

"In the Intro we'll flag up that the vow of silence is something all the fucking religions go in for. Now, what are the women like? Any lookers among 'em?"

"Actually, they're all men, Tarquin."

"No probs! We'll do it from the Gay angle."

"I don't really know if any of them are——"

"Leave it with me. I'll get that shrink—the one who did the masturbation series on Channel Four. We'll get him to do a voice-over—psychobabble about *the sexual dynamics of*

single sex communities. If we can get the odd picture of these guys—do they wear hoods and long frocks and that?—feeling one another up, that’ll be great. These monks—do they make their own wine?”

“I don’t think so. Why?”

“Well, it’d make brilliant visuals to have a few holy Joes falling about, pissed as arseholes.”

“I’ll find out.”

“OK, Jon, how soon can you get on board a plane to the Chilean glacier?”

“Chile? But the monastery is in County Durham!”

“Yeah, but I’m thinking about those visuals. Fucking great mountains in Chile—and loads of sand and that. Millions of sunsets. The latest in computer graphics . . .”

“I really don’t see what Chile’s got to do with it.”

“OK OK—no probs. Central Africa then? Lots of pigmies running around in the buff!”

“It’s about three miles from Hartlepool.”

“Right, right! I hear what you’re saying. But tell me, Jon, who are we gonna get to provide the pulsating rock score?”

“But Tarquin, it’s all about silence! They’re Trappists, for God’s sake!”

“Sure. Agreed. But all docutainments have a pulsating rock score. *Stararse Productions* has its own contracted band. And the punters can’t stand bleedin’ silence. Even Attenborough has Peruvian nose flute music these days.”

“But the whole point—the programme’s *about* silence!”

“So? We need contrast. Have you got anyone in mind for fronting the show, Jon?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. Don Watkins from Emmanuel College.”

“What’s he like?”

“Very bright. Terrific academic record. D.Phil in *Early Medieval Communities in the British Isles*.”

“Yeah! Great! I was thinking of asking Ariadne Gargoyle.”

“Is she an expert on monasticism?”

“Terrific knockers! Have you a title for the prog?”

“Professor Watkins thought *The Aetiology of Restrictive Oral Practice in Religious Affect*.”

“Nah! We need something reelly edgy. I thought, *Shut Your Trap!*”

There are half a dozen more discussions like this, only with clipboards and *Blackberries* and *Espressos* and chardonnay and dolly birds and tantrums and postponements and resignations. Then *Stararse* runs out of money, and they can't finish the programme. So, very, very off-peak, they show a mixture of edited fragments and archive material of Aleister Crowley and a crowd of Satanists cavorting in a monastery garden with the pulsating rock score provided from an old Sid Vicious LP.

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